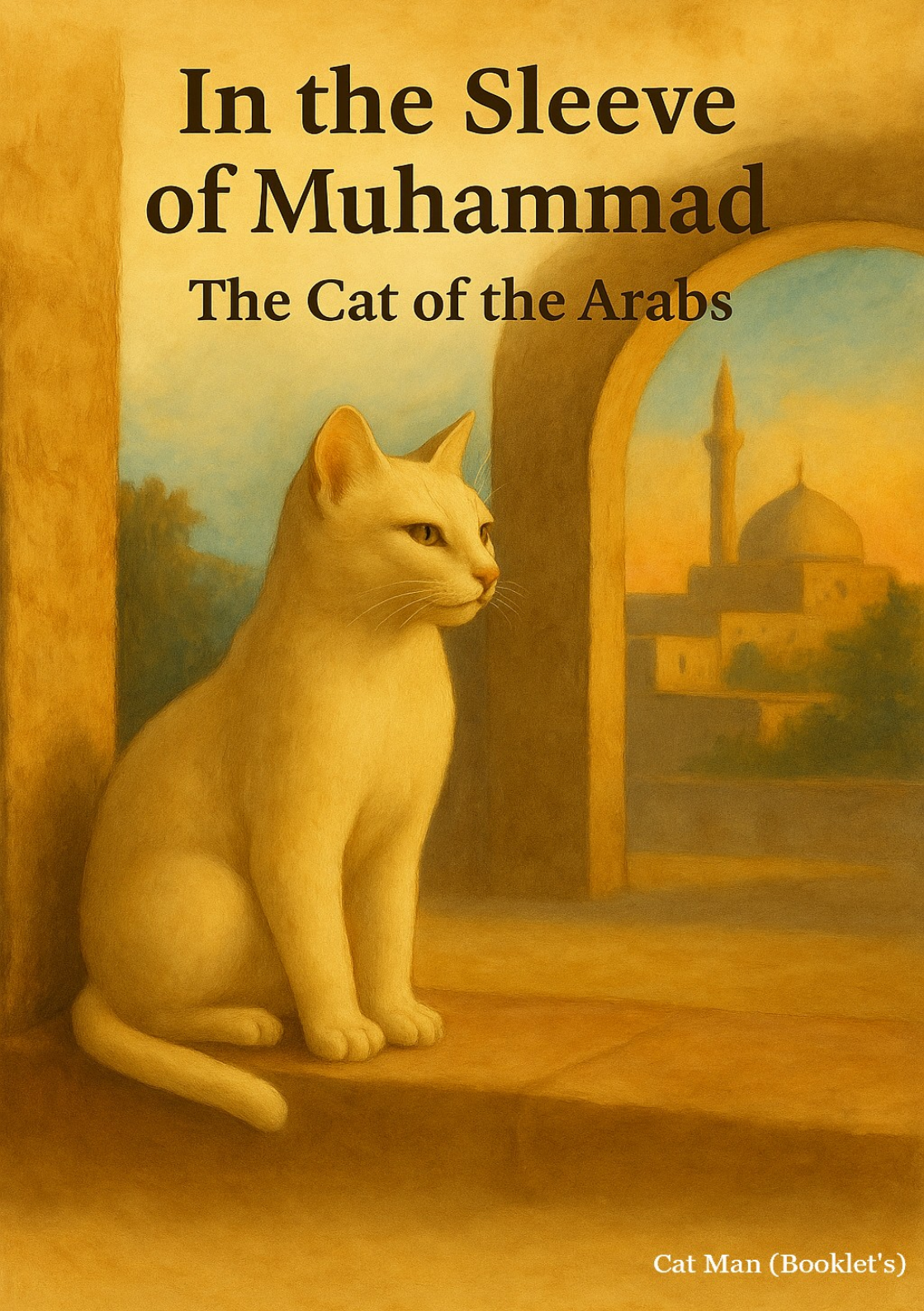
In the Sleeve of Muhammad

The Cat of the Arabs



Cat Man (Booklet's)

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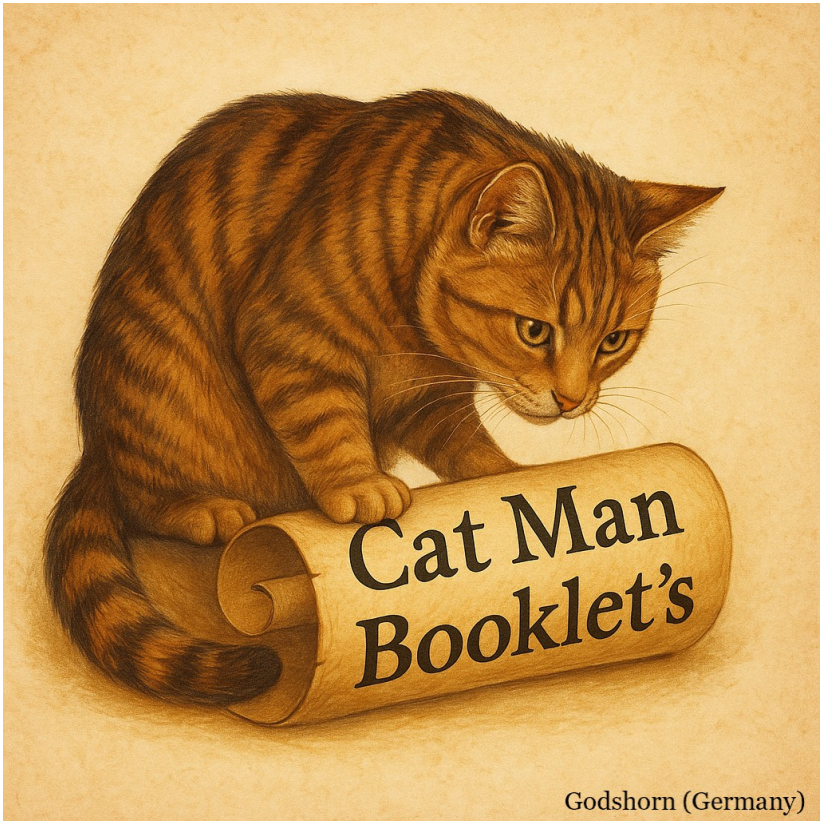
The Cat of the Arabs



Chapter 1
In the Sleeve of Muhammad
The Cat of the Arabs

The Prophet—may God bless him and grant him peace—said that cats are not impure and do not disturb prayer. They belong to the servants and guardians.

(From the Hadith)

A saying from Bedouin literature, however, states that the mouse is one of God's creatures, while the cat is a creature of the devil.

These two views show the ambivalence surrounding the cat's place among the Arabs. At times, the cat appears as a sacred animal; at other times, as a cursed one. Tender attention and harsh contempt, even abuse, can exist side by side in the Middle East. This contrast requires explanation.

In Istanbul, the gateway to the Orient, cats are treated with great affection. There are "open houses" where they are welcomed with courtesy, treated almost like royalty, and given soft beds for the night. Such shelters exist in many Eastern cities and are maintained not only by private cat lovers but often by local authorities. In Syria, cats still enjoy this kind of care today.

Yet a superstition persists that stroking a cat may be dangerous, for the cat might jealously wish misfortune—such as the loss of a child—upon those who show affection to it.

Mohammed introduced strict laws to protect cats. One law stated that if a stranger killed a cat, he had to compensate the owner with a fine of grain. The method for calculating this fine was unusual: the dead animal was hung by its tail so that its nose touched the ground, and red wheat was poured over it until the cat was completely covered. A similar law once existed in the canton of Zurich, Switzerland, until 1780.

But this is only one side of the story. In the Orient, cats were also exposed to severe persecution, often driven by superstition. Bedouins chased them away. And in many regions, most cats still live as strays.

In Jeddah on the Red Sea, hundreds of slender but malnourished cats roam the streets. They wait near doors, hoping to slip inside to grab a piece of meat from a kitchen, yet they are usually chased away before succeeding. A similar scene can be observed in Izmir, Turkey. Thin, disheveled, and often sick cats move shyly through the alleys. Many appear feverish with hunger; others lie exhausted on the roadside. The inhabitants pass by indifferently.

Such is the life of countless cats in Eastern cities—half-wild, abandoned, and struggling to survive.

Many anecdotes reflect their uncertain status. One tells of two men who appeared before a judge, each claiming a cat as his own. The judge ordered that the cat be placed in a basket and released midway between the two houses; whichever house the cat chose would determine its owner. But when the cat was freed, it chose neither path and simply ran away.

The judge acted not only with common sense but also according to old Muslim law. In earlier times, a cat could not be considered private property. Every cat had the right to leave a house it did not like. This rule helped prevent disputes between tribes and families over runaway cats. What cannot be owned cannot be stolen.

The contrast between beautifully furnished cat shelters and abandoned street cats can be understood by considering the difference between Bedouin nomads and settled Arabs. The nomads had little use for cats, while settled people regarded them as valuable and even indispensable helpers, especially in protecting stored provisions.

Chapter 2
The Cat Among the Bedouins

The position of cats among the Bedouins, the nomads of Arabia, is illustrated by the following story:

A Bedouin once hunted a cat. He had no idea what kind of animal it was, so he showed it to a man and asked, "What animal is this?" The man replied, "Al Quittu." He met another man and asked the same question. This man said, "Al Hirru." A third man called it "Al Sinnauru," a fourth "Al-Dajwanu," a fifth "Al-Hajdau," a sixth "Al-Hajtalu," and a seventh "Al Dimmu." The Bedouin thought, "What a strange animal I have caught. It must be valuable if it has so many names. Not as valuable as the lion, which has twenty-one names, but seven is not bad. I will take it to the market and sell it. Perhaps the Lord has blessed me with a great fortune." He went to the city and offered the cat for sale. When people asked him what he wanted with the animal, he replied, "I am selling it." "How much?" someone asked. "A hundred drachmas." The crowd laughed, and one man said, "Do you know how many hundreds of cats live in this city? And no one would pay even half a drachma for one of them." Angry and disappointed, the Bedouin released the cat and shouted after it, "You have many names, but you are worthless."

For a Bedouin, a cat had little use if it could not be sold. Nomads had no storerooms that needed protection from small thieves. A cat offered nothing to people who constantly moved from place to place.

Dogs, however, served travelers and shepherds well. They accompanied them faithfully, guarded the herds, and stayed close without being asked. Cats would have had to be carried in baskets, and they would never have been found when it was time to leave.

The story of Mabsut, preserved in the Hadith, also illustrates how little a Bedouin could form a bond with cats:

Mabsut was the daughter of Magdal, a breeder of dogs. Muawija, a disciple of the Prophet, took her as his wife and moved with her to Egypt—the land of cats. Mabsut received a magnificent house with three gardens, eight baths, and richly furnished rooms for every hour of the day. Numerous servants fulfilled her every wish. Each day, Muawija brought her jewelry—earrings, necklaces, rings—and cared for her in every possible way. Yet Mabsut remained unhappy and longed for her homeland, the open desert. She sang sorrowful songs:

Oh, you tame cats of this land,
You flatter me and are so friendly—
But a thousand times dearer to me
Is a dog who barks outside
And circles the house.

Chapter 3
The Cat Among the Settled Arabs

One of the oldest monuments of Arabic literature, dating from the fifth century, tells of a cat perched on a camel. At first, the camel walked calmly, as usual. Then a cat leapt onto its back and clung to its neck with its claws. It scratched the camel, disturbed its peace, and agitated its spirit. The camel began to lash out and shy away so violently that no one dared approach it. It ran back and forth in panic. What might this curious encounter signify?

It symbolizes the contrast between the Bedouins' way of life and that of the settled Arabs—and even the tension between these two cultures. The cat represented the settled way of life: it protected food supplies that had been gathered and stored with great care, defending them from dangerous pests. The cat was therefore indispensable to people living in fixed homes. For nomads, however, the camel was the essential animal. It carried them and their belongings through the desert. Those who were constantly on the move depended on a reliable means of transport, and so they praised the camel above all else.

The cat's clawing at the camel's neck, its infliction of pain, and the camel's frightened reaction can be understood as symbols of the temptations faced by the Bedouins. They were repeatedly drawn toward the cities, toward a settled and secure life in permanent houses—where the cat would be needed and the camel would lose its purpose.

Yet time and again, they resisted this pull. The idea of trading their wide, free life for the confinement of four walls frightened them, and they fled back to the desert.

This contrast explains why the Arabs' view of the cat was both affectionate and hostile.

Cats were highly valued by the settled population—so much so that one passage of the Hadith recounts how Mohammed's soldiers would sometimes bring cats home from their campaigns, even when their families were suffering hardship and barely had enough to live on. Perhaps the cats they brought back helped by killing the mice and rats that stole the results of their labor.

How, then, did the cat come to the settled Arabs? Was it truly just a kind of gift brought back by Mohammed's warriors?

Chapter 4
The Origin of the Arabian Cat

In the story about the Bedouin who tried to sell a cat, we encounter seven different names for the animal. In reality, the Arabic language has even more—nineteen names in total. Only three of these are borrowed from other languages; the remaining sixteen are of genuine Arabic origin. They imitate the cat's sounds or derive from its characteristics: stealth, night-time activity, beauty, wildness, supposed cunning, or its mysterious eyes. By the sheer number of terms, the cat is surpassed only by the lion—its larger relative—which has twenty-one names.

This abundance of names might suggest that the Arabs themselves domesticated the cat and that the animal originated in Arabia rather than being introduced from elsewhere. Linguistics teaches that foreign things usually enter a language with foreign names, which then become adapted over time, whereas native things carry native names from the start.

Other observations also point in this direction. Cats appear in Arabic literature from its earliest period. Unlike in Western Europe—where the first written references to cats do not appear until the fourth century—we cannot use the appearance of the word "cat" in Arabic literature as evidence of the animal's arrival.

This raises the possibility that cats lived not only in the Nubian desert—where the Egyptians first found and tamed them—but also in the deserts of Arabia. In early times, both Egyptians and settled Arabs may have encountered the wild cat, recognized its usefulness, and tamed it. Still, this theory is difficult to prove. The patience required to domesticate such a shy and distrustful animal seems more in line with Egyptian traits than Bedouin ones. It likely took generations before the cat grew accustomed to living near humans. Even today, cats maintain a certain distance, ensuring their independence is never compromised.

What we know about Bedouin aversion to cats also suggests that the Arabs themselves did not domesticate them. Monks may have brought the first domesticated cats from Egypt to Arabia in the first centuries after Christ. Evidence for this appears in accounts that the Arabs trained marsh weasels and other small predators to hunt mice before they knew the cat. Marsh weasels are still used for hunting in Arabia today, much like falcons in Europe. Yet one passage tells us that humans eventually preferred cats because they killed and ate harmful animals, whereas weasels behaved like wolves among sheep—tearing their prey apart without consuming it.

It was not until the time of Mohammed (570–632) that the cat truly became established in Arabia. The Prophet's warriors later brought it to the West, first to Spain and then to Sardinia.

Several Arab legends attempt to explain the origin of the cat. The Chronicle of Tabari recounts the following tale:

The pig and the cat had not yet been created before the Flood. On Noah's Ark, the waste produced by the animals threatened to overwhelm the inhabitants, and mice and rats multiplied rapidly, gnawing at the ship's walls. Noah stroked the elephant's back, and a pig sprang from its mouth to consume the filth. Then Noah touched the lion's forehead, and the lion sneezed—a cat leapt from its nose and immediately killed the mice and rats.

A censored version of the Koran offers a less favorable account of the pig and elephant. According to Japheth, Noah's son, the elephant produced mountains of dung, from which the pig emerged and wallowed daily. The stench grew unbearable, and eventually mice burst from the pig's nose and began destroying the ark. Noah pleaded with God, who instructed him to stroke the lion's forehead. The lion snorted, and a cat sprang forth, chasing away every mouse.

Another version tells that the animals complained about the rat's destruction. God made the lion sneeze, producing a cat that drove the rat into hiding. A Polish variant claims the devil secretly placed a mouse on the ark to cause it to sink; Noah blocked the leak, and God transformed the cloth he used into a cat.

A Hungarian tale says Noah threw his glove at a dangerous mouse and the glove became a cat.

A Russian version claims the devil persuaded the mouse to gnaw a hole in the ark. The cat caught it, but Noah demanded peace and ordered the cat to keep the mouse confined. For this reason, cats have hated mice ever since.

Another Arab legend gives a very different explanation. When the rocking ark frightened the animals, the monkey became restless and visited his neighbors. He fell in love with a young lioness, flirted loudly, and set off a wave of infidelity among the animals. Their unions produced several new species, but only one pair—the twins born from the monkey and the lioness—were capable of reproduction: the male and female cat.

These legends reveal nothing about the true origin of cats in Arabia. By the time they were written, the cat was already long established. The tales are less attempts to explain the cat's existence and more reflections on life aboard the ark.

Chapter 5
The Prophet and the Cats

The Prophet's affection for cats has been preserved in many accounts.
The best-known story is that of the kitten Muessa, whose favorite resting place was the wide sleeve of Mohammed's robe. When the Prophet was called to prayer, he could not bring himself to disturb the sleeping animal. Instead, he cut off the sleeve and left Muessa to rest undisturbed.

The Prophet promised Muessa a place in paradise, together with all other cats. Aisha, Mohammed's favorite wife, who later held considerable influence in Islam, said: *"The Prophet, may God bless him and grant him peace, would hold out a vessel for a passing cat so it could drink."*

Another passage in the Hadith states: *"The Prophet, may God bless him and grant him peace, was invited to two houses. He accepted the invitation of one but not the other. Asked why, he answered: 'There is a dog in the house of Al-Kajib, but there was a cat in the house of Al-Sahib.'"*

It is also said that Mohammed granted cats the ability to land on their feet. He stroked Muessa three times on the back, and ever since, the part touched by his holy hand has been directed toward the sky, never toward the ground. A legend from Asia Minor tells another story: while Mohammed slept in the desert, a large snake approached to bite him.

A cat rushed in, fought the snake, and killed it. The Prophet awoke to the hissing of the dying reptile, realized the danger he had escaped, blessed the cat, and said:

"Blessings upon you, cat. For saving my life, no creature shall overcome you. You will never fall upon your back. Go—and be thrice blessed."

Elsewhere, it is reported that the Prophet punished a woman severely for mistreating a cat. He decreed that the cat's soul would enter paradise, while the woman's soul would go to hell. On another occasion, God forgave a sinner solely because he had shown kindness to a freezing cat and taken it under his fur. A passage states: *"The Lord forgave Abu Bakr for no other virtue but that he once pitied a small, shivering cat."*

Goethe, in his *West-Eastern Divan*, also counts the cat among the animals favored by Mohammed. In a poem, he lists four creatures promised a place in paradise: the donkey that carried Jesus, the wolf restrained by Mohammed, the faithful dog of the Sleepers of Ephesus, and Abuherrira's cat. Abuherrira—"father of cats"—was a companion of the Prophet. Formerly a farmer, he joined Mohammed in his religious campaigns. It was Mohammed who gave him this name, likely because of his affection for cats.

Islamic tradition sometimes refers to Mohammed as "the white cat" or "Sakina." Sakina—derived from the Hebrew *Shekina*—means "presence of God, tranquility, security." White cats thus became symbols of inner peace.

The Prophet also forbade the consumption of cat meat. Two old Arabic proverbs suggest that the Arabs had little desire to eat it anyway: *"He who eats cat meat will spend his life chewing,"* and *"If you eat cats, would eating pork still be worse?"*

Even so, cats in Arabia faced constant danger—not from hunger, but from superstition, for many folk remedies required parts of the cat.

Chapter 6
Cats in Arab Superstition

Because Muslims were forbidden to eat cat meat, superstitious healing practices often assigned secret powers to the flesh or specific parts of the cat. Folk medicine recorded numerous recipes built on such beliefs. One said: *"Whoever eats the meat of a black cat cannot be enchanted."* People who feared harmful magic would sometimes eat cat meat in secret, even though they disliked its taste.

Carrying a cat's tooth was believed to offer protection at night and give courage.

The spleen of a cat was considered beneficial for menstruating women, especially in cases of heavy bleeding.

Rubbing oneself with cat bile, according to another belief, enabled a person to see as well at night as during the day.

When mixed with red cumin and salt, cat bile was also thought to heal wounds rapidly.

It was said that drinking cat blood made a man irresistible to all women.

And if he rubbed cat blood on his penis before intercourse, the woman would love him passionately.

Countless cats in Arabia died because of such beliefs. These practices were based on the assumption that specific qualities of animals could be transferred to humans. Just as the heart of a hare was said to cause cowardice, or the horn of an antelope to give speed, the erotic nature attributed to cats was believed to bring passionate love. Because cats were regarded as descendants of lions—according to the legends of Noah's Ark—their blood was thought to hold enormous power. One saying claimed: *"If a cat were to urinate into the sea, it would kill ten thousand fish."* Among the Egyptians, the same connection existed: originally, the lion was the sacred animal of the goddess Bastet, and only later did the cat take its place.

Alongside dangerous remedies and love potions, there were also superstitious rules meant to protect cats. One belief held that every second-born child in a twin birth could transform into a cat at any time. Because of this, people were urged to treat cats kindly—no one could know whether a cat might actually be a transformed child.

Lady Duff Gordon reported an example of this belief in *Macmillan's Magazine*:
She described sitting with several men when she offered milk to a cat. The cat refused and ran away. A merchant present warned her to be gentle, claiming the cat was the son of a poor man who could not feed his children properly. He added that second-born twins wander at night in the form of cats if they go to bed hungry.

Their bodies lie motionless as if dead, and no one must touch them, or their souls cannot return. Once such a child reaches ten or twelve years of age, the transformation ceases. Because of this possibility, one must never strike a cat. If someone were to hit such a cat, the child would show bruises the next day. A mixture of finely chopped onions added to the milk of newborn twins was said to prevent this transformation.

This belief shows the close association between cats and supernatural forces in Arab imagination. Many peoples regarded cats as demonic creatures. The Egyptians saw them as benevolent spirits or even gods. The Arabs, however, believed that "jinn"—spirits that could be helpful but were often hostile—preferred to appear in the form of cats. The cat that clung to the camel's neck and frightened it was considered such a jinn. In Islamic demonology, even Sheitan, the devil, often took the shape of a cat.

Black cats were suspected most often of being jinn in disguise. They were sometimes called "jinn cats" and were heavily persecuted. People believed that carrying a limb from such a cat—especially a paw—could grant protection against evil spirits.

Two examples illustrate these practices:

A malicious jinn once tried to kidnap a child but failed. She explained that the child wore an amulet containing a cat's tooth. Because of this, people hung cat teeth around their children's necks to protect them from the evil eye.

Another recipe instructed mixing dried gall from a black cat with gall from a black hen. When rubbed on the skin, this mixture was believed to summon the jinn, who would then fulfill every wish. Such methods were regarded as effective.

Chapter 7
Cat Dreams

Cats also played an important role in dream interpretation. The ancient Arabs valued their dreams highly. Mohammed himself asked his disciples each morning what they had dreamed and reflected carefully on his own dreams. He believed that God communicated through dreams—both to him and to his followers—revealing what they should teach the people.

Professional dream interpreters, however, claimed that dreams foretold the future. To strengthen their authority, they taught that the future would unfold in accordance with the interpreter's explanation, provided the dreamer firmly believed in it. And most people who sought out a dream interpreter did indeed believe in the accuracy of the interpretation.

The most famous dream interpreter of the time was Ibn Sirin, who died in 728 AD. He was the father of twenty sons and ten daughters, a legal scholar and philosopher, and the author of the well-known *Book of Collected Dreams*. Following his interpretive principles, he distinguished, for example:

If a person dreams of eating a dead animal, such as a cat, then for Muslims—who are forbidden to eat such meat—the dream signifies forbidden possession or a difficult situation. For others, who are allowed to eat this food, it signifies benefit and gain.

Or:

If someone sees a cat in a dream, it may mean that a loyal servant will come into the dreamer's life, or that greed will take hold of them.

The interpreter Jafar-i-Sadiq offered simpler rules. A few of his interpretations include:

If a cat steals something in a dream, there is a thief in the house.

If someone sees a cat in a dream, they will become stingy.

If a cat scratches or bites in a dream, it foretells the loss of a servant.

If scratch marks from a cat appear on one's skin in a dream, the dreamer will suffer an illness lasting a year.

If a cat appears in a dream and does not meow, a year of peace lies ahead.

If a wild cat appears, it promises a year of hardship and trouble.

If someone dreams of buying a cat, they will waste their money.

If someone eats cat meat in a dream, they will become skilled in magic.

CAT
MAN

Chapter 8
Hatred, Legends, and the Return of Old Beliefs

Senseless killings of cats driven by superstition, the kitten in Mohammed's sleeve, cats as jinn and as favored animals—together, these elements form the picture of the cat's life in Arabia.

Hostility toward cats, questionable medical practices involving their blood and flesh, rejection and demonization—these attitudes can be traced to an older layer of Arab culture: the Bedouin, pre-Mohammedan worldview. The Prophet and later Islamic scholars, by contrast, elevated the cat's status. As Arabs settled and developed permanent households, they recognized the value of cats more clearly. The more settled their lifestyle became, the more indispensable and beloved cats grew.

Yet the old beliefs never disappeared entirely. After the Prophet's death, they found their way back into Islamic thought. Some scholars even argued that the devil had appeared to Mohammed in the form of the very animal he had described as harmless and pure. According to them, Sheitan had deceived the Prophet by disguising himself as a cat.

This belief is also reflected in a later legend. On Judgment Day, it is said that Arab cats will be asked how they fared on earth. Their answer will be:

"Our masters never gave us anything to eat and never gave us anything to drink."

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For your Notes

Cat Man (Booklet's)